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IDEOLOGY AND REAL(ISM)

GENERICSCIENCE, PHILOFICTION ŽIŽEK, CAPITALCOMMODITY, IDEOLOGY, REAL ABSTRACTION

Isn't the emphasis on the systemic character of capitalism what separates Marx's analysis from moralizing socialism(?) The idea that the misleadingly-named 'ruling class' do anything more than manage and administer Capital is an idle fantasy. Capitalists can decide on which groups are exploited, but they cannot legislate away exploitation itself. (How long would a CEO with such ambitions last?) It is not exculpatory but simply realistic to acknowledge that Capital, not capitalists, runs the show. However, realism about capitalism is not the same as Capitalist Realism. Neo-liberalism is defined not by the idea that Capital is a remorseless machine but by the claim that there is *no viable alternative* to its rule." – Mark Fisher, Left Hyperstition 2: Be Unrealistic, Change What's Possible

One of the repeated accusations that arose in the great /Acc wars of 2017 was that the understanding of capital that was being posited—as something operated at a higher level than everyday life, political management, and even ideological fixation—was itself an unfortunate expression of capitalist ideology, one tantamount to the infamous Thatcherite slogan that there is indeed no alternative to its strange, infernal logic. Seen from this point of view, the so-called accelerationist take on capital (a jargon-laced analytic stance I've personally progressively moved away from, opting for a return to a more 'classically' Marxist approach—something that nonetheless was a great influence on acceleration, particularly in the 'U' variety) is conflated with Fisher's 'capitalist realism'. This, in turn, produce a solution by way of inverting the accelerationist counterpoint: if accelerationist theory is garbage-can ideology, and the accelerationist theory suggests that capital is a self-moving substance unto itself, then the 'revolutionary path'—or whatever equivalent to this one may pose—is to configure capital as something always already subordinated to human intentionality. Political capacity is thus restored.

The problem with this picture, at least from a Marxist—as well as an accelerationist—ground, is where the ideological configuration is positioned. It has to be asked what form of capitalist ideology promotes capital as an inhuman force that ensnares the proletariat and bourgeoisie alike in its logic, robbing them of their agency and pushing them towards alien ends? In the great spectrum of political economy and liberal polity, the answer simply is *none*. Capitalist ideology promotes capitalism not only as an *ism* (we should be avoiding this term as much as possible and opt instead for either addressing capital directly or by

reference to the capitalist mode of production), but more specifically as a humanism. The material class relations that constitute the proletariat and bourgeoisie are eliminated for the ideal of a flexible atomized subject who stands free from the weight of history; the vital dialectical image of the capitalist mode of production containing both progressive and regressive elements that will eventually come to a historical loggerhead is smeared into obscurity by a vibrant image of non-historical progress (non-historical because the relations and mechanisms unique to the bourgeois epoch are presented as *transhistorical*, coupled to a sense of progress that finds capital first and foremost agential empowerment).

The breakage of the liberal ideology into left and right wings (relatively speaking, of course) never manages to undermine this core of capitalist-humanism, and only turns it around under the differing filters of positive and negative freedoms. Even under virulent neoliberalism does it persist: nowhere in the pages of libertarian journals and the halls of Beltway think-tanks does the image of *alien capital* gain traction. The Adam Smith Institute doesn't promote the entrepreneur of the self as some sort of Snidely Whiplash conspiratorial shenanigan; it promotes it because it earnestly *believes* what it preaches.

In his ideological critique, Marx was taking to task the capitalist-humanism of the 'classical liberals' (a retroactively-assembled, ideological formation if there ever was one!); this is why we get the picture, so curious at first blush, of a book bearing the subtitle of *A Critique of Political Economy* that presents capital as functioning like the Hegelian *geist* by its fourth chapter. Capital as inhuman force, as a historical machine that takes a hold of the bourgeoisie and proletariat as if by possession—to reach towards this is to pierce the ideological veil to find the tracing of something swirling below it. Hence Fisher's point in the quote that opened this post: capitalist realism is a reflection of the ideological fantasy of the neoliberal phase of capitalist development and is wholly distinct from the sort of picture drawn by the accelerationists—which is really an elaboration and restaging of the analysis offered by Marx. Thus to flip the script and return capital to something under the sway of human intentionality, and more specifically under the command of the powerful capitalist, is to avoid the Real by staying within the foundational assumptions of capitalist realism.

As far back as *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žizek had already deepened and advanced this line of inquiry, fundamentally problematizing both sides of the debate along the way. He convincingly points out that the structure of Marx's account of commodity fetishism contains a kind of doubled illusion, a two-layered process that encompasses the ideological side of capitalism and the non-human logic of commodities. He writes:

...the illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but they are still doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called ideological fantasy. (29-30)

The twisting structure of Žizek's argument here is that while commodity fetishism makes the relationship between people appear as commodities whilst imbuing commodities with the appearance life-like power, it is in actuality being overlooked. The logic of the commodity, while beginning as illusion, comes to operate on a real, material level in the sense that it imparts itself as the universal mediator of social relations. What's more is that this can be mapped to a process of historical passage that is itself reflected in a shift in Marx's own theory of abstraction, or what Alberto Toscano calls a "break with a generic, humanist, or anthropological concept of abstraction" for a "notion of *real abstraction*—abstraction not as mere mask, fantasy or diversion, but as a force operative in the world". This first theory, Toscano argues, is inherited from Feuerbach and carries from him the assumption of "the genus 'humanity'". Abstractions of all sorts—political and religious, but particularly (for Marx) economic—are but "fictitious hypostases of [this] positive, underlying generic essence that is not itself prey to historical or logic becoming". The second, however, provides an understanding of abstraction that undermines this humanist portrait:

The crucial theoretical revolution would then be the one that passes from this fundamentally intellectualist notion of abstraction—which presumes liberation as a 'recovery' of the presupposed genus (putting Man where God, qua distorted humanity, had once stood)—to a vision of abstraction that, rather than depicting it as a structure of illusion, recognizes it as a social, historical, and 'transindividual' phenomenon... Society is above all a relation: the role of these univocal simple abstractions—such as value, labor, private property—in the formation of the concrete must be carefully gauged so that they do not mutate back into those powerless and separate, not to mention mystifying, intellectual abstractions that had occupied the earlier theory of ideology. But these abstractions are not mental categories that ideally precede the concrete; they are real abstractions that are truly caught up in the social whole, the social relation.

Toscano later offers the radical conclusion posed by Alfred Sohn-Rethel: real abstraction does not only emerge from a thought becoming a thing—it is also "a relation, or even a thing, which then becomes a thought". Read back onto Žizek, a portrait is drawn in which the illusion ceases to be illusion but becomes operative, the very thing that structures society by serving as the force that mediates it (if society is a relation, or more properly series or networks of relations, then it indeed will intrinsically maintain

some form of mediation—what Sohn-Rethel called the “social synthesis”). Such is the obscured nature of capital (and not to mention to one of the very reasons why capital operates above and beyond the agency of the capitalist or politician)

What then of *capitalism* as ideology? It should be clear that it not only serves to protect the capitalist mode of production in either conscious or unconscious registers, but to in fact obscure this deeper structure of capitalist reality. The realism, in other words, is the illusion; the thing that appears as illusion is itself closer to an actual realism. Faced with some a dynamic obscuring and domino-effect of reversals it is clear that by taking flight to an understanding of capital as something subjected *a priori* to human intentionality or command serves only to reinforce the ideological frontier.

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